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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of accreditation is discussed in a paper commissioned by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools for a project on "Rethinking Accreditation." After defining accreditation and distinguishing it from assessment, evaluation and "meta-evaluation" are discussed, including the nature of accreditation in general, the importance of goals as norms of evaluation, and the importance of evaluating accrediting associations. Under the topic of epistemology and method, evaluation theory and methodology in accreditation are discussed in terms of public standards, institutional self-study, site visits by a visiting team, and the process of reviewing the team report with final confirmation by the commission. Two recurrent issues in this evaluation are the goal of helping improve the quality of the educational institution and the lack of a measure of outcomes independent of the evaluation process. The importance of the improvement of the quality of higher education is stressed. (SM)

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The Philosophy of Accreditation

Frederick Crosson

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF ACCREDITATION

Frederick Crosson

EVALUATION AND META-EVALUATION

A. The Nature of Accreditation

One of the most useful ways to begin getting clear about a topic is to see how it is similar to and how it is different from related things. It's like sketching a map of the logical space around the topic.

So I want to begin thinking about accreditation by situating it between two other kinds of evaluation of things, by distinguishing two other evaluation-relations to things.

On one side, we have things which don't by nature change or grow in a directional way: rocks, crystals, atoms, clouds. Of course all of these things are constantly changing — eroding, decaying, gaining or losing energy — but not in such a way that they can be said to succeed or fail in achieving some goal. We can assess them as good or bad examples of their kind, but not as succeeding or failing to develop into something.

On the other side, we have things which **are** the product of a process of development — mature organisms, man-made instruments — but which we assess only in terms of whether they are fully mature or adequately fashioned. Whether the tomato is ripe, whether the microscope magnifies properly — here we are not interested in the farmer's or manufacturer's methods, but simply in whether or not the end product is well-formed.

Now between these two categories, there is a third, composed of systems organized to bring about a desired end, through a process of development, and where our interest is in the organization of the process, in not only **whether,** but in **how** the organized system succeeds or fails. Here we are interested in the various ways in which and the various degrees to which the planned structure or the organized system succeeds or fails in achieving its goal.

Evaluation thus characterized has a sense only where it applies to a process, exhibited in an object or institution, extended through time, and aimed at a definite term.

In this sense, I want to distinguish accreditation sharply from an assessment (our second category) which is aimed only at determining whether the finished product, the terminal state or thing, meets certain standards, such as in the work of the National Bureau of Standards. Assessment of this sort focused on the product — product evaluation — may also involve comparative rankings of the product, as in the work of *Consumer Reports*. And such assessments of the product or outcome may **also** be employed as a part of the evaluation of the institution or organization producing the outcome state of affairs. But in this last case, the assessment of the pro-

duct, whether comparative or not, plays only a part; it has significance only as contributing to the evaluation of the institution and its undertaking. In this case, we are interested not only in whether the institution is succeeding or failing, but in how or in what ways it is succeeding or failing.

Two observations, the first important, may be made here. Michael Scriven has claimed (in his critical essay on *The Logic of Evaluation*) that outcome assessment of the "performance of the graduates" is "the only criterion that is necessary, and surely almost sufficient" to the evaluation of educational institutions. No doubt this judgment reflects his esteem for product evaluation and especially for the work of *Consumer Reports*. And if a practicable measure of such outcomes were at hand, or devisable, there might be a good deal to be said in favor of making outcome assessments a primary concern of accreditation. But one concern which his proposal ignores is the long-recognized and arguably proper responsibility of institutional (and program) accrediting associations to assist in improving of the quality of the enterprises of education in the schools and colleges. Even if institutions could be adequately assessed on the basis of the performance of graduates, that would not exhaust the responsibility of the accrediting association to its members. Whether in fact this responsibility has been sufficiently addressed will be considered later.

The second observation is simply the acknowledgement that in decades past, accreditation has at times been conceived and practiced as the determination of whether or not an educational institution meets certain stipulated standards, primarily quantitative, such as the size and credentials of the faculty, the number of books in the library and so forth. One of the reasons for changing from this conception of accreditation was that it came to be viewed as focusing too exclusively on the quantifiable resources and not paying sufficient attention to the adequacy of some such means to the goals of the institution. The shift to taking the goals or purposes as the primary norm by which to evaluate has continued, with various modification, down to the present time.

B. Goals as Norms of Evaluation

A goal or purpose may be 1) aimed at because it is just naturally good or desirable, e.g., health; or 2) aimed at because it fulfills or promises to fulfill some social need or some desired state of society, e.g., better automobile drivers; or 3) some combination of these. Postsecondary education, I shall want to claim, falls into the third of these categories. Some of the ends of postsecondary education are just naturally good for any human being: such things as being able to think out clearly one's thoughts into words, to understand and appreciate the latent order and subtler aspects of society and nature and language. And some of the ends of postsecondary education are desirable for the society and the role of the individual in society: such things as the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill general roles like that of citizen, and specific roles, e.g., accountant or engineer. The former of these two component ends, just because it is naturally desirable, changes much less

over the course of history than the latter: the skills Cicero wanted in the educated Roman are still pretty recognizable, but the skills of a Roman engineer or accountant would be virtually useless in our society — and vice versa.

The inference to which this points is that the naturally appropriate ends provide one basis for the assessment, not simply of the adequacy of the resources and programs of an institution to reach its goals, but of some part of the goals as such. We can ask, on the basis of these naturally appropriate ends, whether an institution is assisting the appropriate growth of its students in the program which it offers, or whether it is responding only to a perceived social need (or perhaps only to a desire on the part of its clientele). This is a question with which we are familiar and confident in the case of elementary and secondary schools: we are not merely preparing them for roles in society, but also teaching them things which it is good for anyone to know. The diversity of postsecondary education leads to a certain hesitancy in responding with the same confidence, but the requirement, for example, of the North Central Association that every accreditable institution include a general education component in its curriculum would seem to rest ultimately on no other principle.

A second basis for assessing goals as such is in terms of the conception of the social need to which the program aims at responding: does the program or institution adequately conceive the need (and its possibly changing character)? Obviously delicate questions arise here, but it would certainly seem unethical for an evaluation to measure merely whether and how the means (resources and process) were achieving (or failing to achieve) their goal if it were clear that the defined goal misconceived the social need. (E.g., training people to repair radio-tube TV sets). Like the first, this second basis for assessing the goals of an institution provides the ground not merely for a "pass-no pass" decision but for redirecting and improving its performance.

Next and most familiarly, a process may be evaluated on whether or not it is appropriately organized to achieve its (properly conceived) goals, whether it is, in fact achieving them and is likely to continue to do so. These are concerned with not the goals but the means and process of attaining them.

If we state four common standards without the inclusion of their specific reference to educational institutions, we get a general format for evaluation of any kind of social program or institution:

1. it has clear and publicly stated purposes, consistent with its mission.
2. it has effectively organized adequate human, financial and physical resources into programs to accomplish its purposes.
3. it is accomplishing its purposes.
4. it can continue to accomplish it purposes.

C. Evaluating Accrediting Associations

Let us now put ourselves in a "meta-evaluation" position: we will take these four statements as a declaration of the purposes of the evaluating or

accrediting body. We will take them as the "mission" of the accrediting body, namely the goal of seeking to determine whether these criteria are adequately fulfilled in the to-be-accredited program or institution. We will consider whether the accrediting process is itself organized in such a way as to achieve that "mission." (Evaluation is a "self-referential" concept: we can and should evaluate evaluation.)

First of all, following the above remarks, we can ask whether these represent an adequate and appropriate statement of the mission or purpose of the accrediting body. It appears immediately that the four-part statement is not adequate to the elsewhere-declared purposes of many accrediting bodies. It does not contain any clear reference to the intention to "assist in the improvement of the institution." Of course, we can add that to the above standards, but then it sounds as if there were two distinct purposes. What is the relation between them?

The standards above describe a monitoring or certifying function, and despite the historical and actual intent of accrediting associations, the hiatus which comes into view here accounts, I believe, for the fact that the eminently appropriate goal of improving quality has not been effectively carried out. It is not a small question to raise. American higher education, for all its immense growth in the last half century, has been harmed as well as helped by that growth, fueled by massive investments of government funds which have tempted as well as assisted institutions and which have vastly increased the need to respond to governmental (not to speak of bureaucratic) supervision. One need not dwell on the decline of SAT scores or the spate of reports lamenting the eroding of educational quality. We very much need attention to the means by which the goal of improving quality can be linked more effectively to the goal of evaluation and accreditation. More of this later.

Second, if we take the standards as describing part of the goal of the accrediting body, the question naturally arises (second standard) as to the means of achieving that goal. Self-study (the major element at present of linkage to improvement), site visit, review procedures, final decision: these stages have emerged in the course of time in response to the query, how do we go about achieving our goal? How do we go about verifying that an accreditable institution satisfies the standards? How satisfactory are these stages as a response? A strong case can be made that, despite margins of error, the first two standards are in pretty good shape with respect to verification. The case for the third, on the other hand, is less strong because it rests more on indirect evidence than the other two. And this casts a shadow over the fourth. By and large, the evidence that the institution is achieving its purposes tends in practice to be satisfied or confirmed by the records showing that students have taken a certain number of appropriately-titled courses with a C average. We have no more direct and independent means of assessing the outcomes, in large part because of the diversity of the postsecondary institutions under scrutiny. More of this later, too.

What needs closer examination at this point is the method by which the evaluating body seeks to accomplish its purposes, i.e., to ascertain that the

standards are satisfied (or to what extent they are). This will be the object of the second part of this essay.

Before this is undertaken, however, let us take a step back out of the path which we have been following and look at it from outside. Thinking always tends to pursue the line of inquiry which has opened up before it, but it is important to reflect on the validity of that path, to ask ourselves how we came to be following it and whether there are alternatives.

We began by characterizing a field of inquiry, distinguishing or circumscribing the kinds of entities with which we are concerned in assessment. These were identified as organizations which exhibited a developmental process (i.e., with temporal phases) tending toward some identifiable terminus, and which could therefore be said to succeed or fail in attaining that goal. A subclass of these, organizations devised by man and directed toward a combination of naturally and socially desirable goals, was analyzed in terms of the possibility of assessment of the adequacy of both goals and means of attainment (whether and how the organization succeeds or fails). At that point, we introduced the notion of standards as defining the purpose of an accrediting body, and proceeded toward a meta-evaluation of that body in terms of whether its purposes and its means for achieving those purposes were appropriate.

But we did not justify the introduction of an accrediting body by showing that it was necessary or appropriate for some reason. So let us ask, to what need does it respond? Why do we need a distinct accrediting body? Granted that assessment is necessary, why could it not be done by the respective organizations themselves, individually? Many graduate schools currently monitor themselves by periodically doing a self-study and inviting in a committee of peer visitors to review their programs and to provide assessments aimed at confirming or improving their quality. It seems conceivable that such a method of evaluation could be employed generally by educational institutions. Why would that not be adequate?

The crucial counterquestion here is: adequate for what? Even if we assume the right motivation (desire for candid evaluation, honest self-studies, selection of competent visitors, etc.), the result is for home consumption, aimed at self-assessment for the sake of improving (or confirming) quality. Such studies are not, in my experience, normally made public, not even disseminated thoroughly in the home institutions, however much they are taken seriously by the departments involved. So what would be missing is the dimension of responsibility to the clientele, the prospective students and employers of students, i.e., to the general public. Moreover, there would be in this case no general minimum standards other than idiosyncratic ones: it would be up to the institution initiating the assessment to decide whether to collapse a poorly-rated program or to continue to offer it. A separate accrediting body meets its public responsibility by having the beginning and the end of the process of evaluation open: *viz.*, the standards on the one hand and the final judgment about whether they are met. If either of these were not declared publicly, that responsibility would not be adequately discharged.

Why should there be a dimension of public responsibility? Because any society, for the sake of its own intrinsic ends, has to be concerned with the fulfillment of the natural and social needs of its citizens, has to be concerned with the kind of people it produces and with their human and functional development. Wouldn't it suffice, to meet this objection to self-assessment, to mandate standards and to require the publication of the results? Conceivably. But that would be to ignore, naively, the strength of self-interest in both persons and institutions. It would be to tempt the weakening of the (hypothesized) genuine concern for candid self-studies and impartial visiting teams. In order to do what is fair, we all need the help of external discipline: laws, sanctions, public opinion. If the government of the society doesn't provide that adequately, our custom in America is to band together to discipline ourselves to meet standards. Without that banding together, some institutions might indeed continue to measure themselves against high self-set standards, but some might not, and the general public would be the loser.

But if this solution has the genius of the American idiom, it has also its potential shortcoming. The distinct "governing" personnel derive their authority from the consent of the "governed." And this represents a tacit constraint on that authority: there are limits to what can be required of the constituent members. We may indeed expect every citizen to be law-abiding, to observe the lowest common denominator required of all; but how far beyond that can we go in pressing citizens to be better than merely law-abiding? Can we elicit and strengthen the aspiration to be meritorious?

Perhaps we may infer from the analysis above the need for locating the responsibility for accreditation in an agency distinct from the accredited institutions. But I think we can also glimpse the hiatus which we have noted earlier between the monitoring function thus justified in terms of threshold standards and the desirable need for constant attention to improvement. How can these be effectively joined?

EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHOD

A. Evaluation Theory

A great deal has been written in the last decade on the developing discipline of evaluation. Spurred by federal requirements to assess the success of government-funded educational and social programs, and spurred by federal grants to do so, the field has half (or perhaps three-quarters) emerged from fairly well-defined and long-established areas like research and testing. In trying to conceptualize the discipline as a distinctive one, many of the publications devoted to evaluation as a field have been directed to carrying on a battle to distinguish it from related or similar enterprises and to distinguish its methodology from the methodologies which have characterized related fields of the human sciences.

Fundamental to understanding anything is seeing how it is similar to and how it is different from other things, whether we are talking about sciences

or schools of painting or persons. (If this procedure of comparison is not conscious and explicit, it will be present in the form of the metaphors which are employed to describe the object of inquiry, and we will see some examples of this.) Thus the nature of evaluation has to be distinguished from more quantifiable disciplines like measurement and testing.

The field of evaluation theory has acknowledged, indeed insisted, for example, that the criteria of assessment must be defined in relation to values, that there are different kinds of evaluation directed toward different functions of it (e.g., improvement, accountability, understanding), and that the judgment of the evaluator introduces a non-empirical factor, all of which characteristics distinguish evaluation (in degree, at least) from the natural sciences.

Elements such as these being integral to evaluation, if the enterprise is to have any reliability and objectivity, then the positivist distinction between facts and values, as well as the related distinction between quantitative and qualitative claims (or of fact and theory) must be rejected. And again, an enormous amount of the publications of evaluation theorists has been directed toward the criticism of these distinctions, on the basis of the currently dominant post-positivist philosophy of science (Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions, et al.*). One can only rejoice to see these criticisms brought to bear on an outmoded conception of inquiry in the human sciences. At the same time, one cannot escape the feeling that so much attention is directed to claiming the territory and securing the boundaries of the field that too little has been done to advance it. One of the signs of that is that there are a half-dozen competing paradigms or theories of what evaluation is and how it should function. (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, *Systematic Evaluations*, 1985)

So while proper attention to the work of those engaged in clarifying the discipline of evaluation can wipe away the residual cobwebs of bad theories of what we are doing, and can provide useful analyses of how to go about evaluating, the field is still being born and we shouldn't try to steer by it.

B. Methodology in Accreditation

Consider now the methodical phases of the process of educational accreditation as they presently exist.

Standards. First, there are the public standards, agreed to by the member institutions, which include those for eligibility and those for accreditation. These standards are stated in general terms, and given the diversity of postsecondary education it is hard to imagine how they could not be. Certainly the difficulty of being more specific has been increasing: consider the universe of colleges accredited fifty years ago and how much they had in common compared to today. Still, this last remark gives one pause. How much can today's diversity increase in yet unimagined ways and so further press against the coherent meaning of the present statements?

On the other hand, the desire for specificity in the statement of standards is to some extent a relic of positivism, insofar as it longs for statements which lack any ambiguity and therefore straightforwardly mean the same to all.

In the human sciences and disciplines (and in the humanities), the objects of inquiry have always been and necessarily are subject to a hermeneutical method, a skill of interpretation which grasps the polysemic nature of words and actions and traces a coherent path through the potential ambiguities. That does not mean that any path — any interpretation — is equally valid or appropriate. It does imply that convergent and objective judgments will require some contribution on the part of the judges: this is simply to acknowledge that the meaning of the standard is not unambiguous. In fact, it is now generally conceded that in the physical sciences, even observation statements are "theory-laden," i.e., the observations are inevitably couched in the language of a specific, paradigmatic perspective on nature. The difference between the human disciplines and the physical sciences is here only one of degree.

The conclusion to be drawn is of course not that vagueness and imprecision in the statement of standards are okay because interpretation will resolve the vagueness. It is rather that the language of the standards, like that of the law, rests on accumulated experience and must remain open to changing conditions and to the creative response of human invention. Its accumulated experience requires a correlative experience and intelligence in its reading.

Self-Study. Second phase: the institution to be evaluated does a self-assessment on the basis of the public standards, making its case, so to speak, for accreditation. The metaphor implicit here, that of a legal proceeding, suggests a plausible way of regarding the self-study, but if we expand the metaphor a bit it can serve to raise questions about the process. To regard evaluation as like a trial seems fair enough, but then where is the prosecutor or the "devil's advocate"? If the visiting team is the judge, should someone speak for the other side? When Phi Beta Kappa is to visit an institution which has applied (by similar process) for a chapter, it notifies all existing chapters and invites their comments. Some responses are cranky, but some are helpful in directing attention to particular issues. In the present procedure of accreditation, no one is charged with the role of "loyal opposition." Or should we reject the legal model as inappropriate?

The self-study considered as the legal case for accreditation has further limitations. It is like a person acting as his own lawyer: the compilers of the study normally have no acquired skills in institutional evaluation, neither in the sense of training nor in the sense of having had the opportunity to approach other institutions from this perspective. Workshops to help institutions prepare for their self-studies can help substantially alleviate but not wholly eliminate this limitation. Finally, the legal model leads us to wonder whether, like any good lawyer, the institution will not be inclined or tempted to be silent about factors which would weaken its case.

One may be inclined to refuse the description of the self-study in terms of the juridical metaphor and prefer perhaps that of the physician's examination, but then one must at least take cognizance of those aspects of the self-study phase which the legal metaphor draws to one's attention.

Visiting Team. Third, the site visit is generally acknowledged to be the critical phase of the process, because it is this which must supply some of what is lacking in the first two phases. It is the role of the team of assessors to supply, on the basis of their experience, what is necessarily lacking in the statement of standards, namely their interpretation as applicable to this particular institution. It is in particular their role to supply what is normally lacking to the institutional self-study, namely the comparative context.

To refer to the comparative context is not to imply that the assessment is comparative. In intention that is clearly not the case, since the judgment is neither one of grading nor of ranking but only of whether or not the criteria are met. But it is the ineradicable role of the comparative context, i.e., the experiential background of the evaluators, which allows the relevant salient parts of the whole to emerge and to form a gestalt. That gestalt is the coming into view of the overall health or ethos of the institution.

Here I want to speak in the first person, on the basis of fifteen years of experience as a consultant-evaluator: that is a warning to you that you must protect yourself (and me) from perspectival bias.

Let me provide a metaphor which guides my reflection here, alluded to just now in the reference to the "coming into view." Computer checker-playing programs have been very successful in playing championship-level games; but they have not yet succeeded in consistently defeating checker champions. Without going into the reasons for that, let me simply report that after playing computer opponents, a number of the (human) checker champions have independently commented that the computer did not have a *style* of playing. We all know what it means to say that someone plays boldly or carelessly or cautiously or timidly. Think now how that quality comes into view in a game. It is not visible in individual moves or even gambits, but only as a larger, more comprehensive entity. Indeed for one who knows nothing but the formal rules of the game, it may not be visible at all, it may not come into view. But for someone who has played many games against different opponents, it is essentially as salient as any of the individual moves. I want to take that as a model of the way in which the overall health or ethos of an educational institution appears to the visiting team.

I refer to the team as a whole here because what is at issue is a group perception. The team begins with the picture derived from close study of the documents and self-study provided by the school, supplemented by diagnostic questions and speculations about gaps in the data, implications, surmises. On the first evening of the visit, it comes together and shares these, "re-gestalting" tentatively the picture which has been offered in the self-study, converging on areas that need more investigation and dividing responsibilities for the next days. During these days, there are various re-groupings, sharing of information and perspectives, observations and interviews. Finally there is a culminating session in which by a kind of Delphi method a consensus (usually not a majority vote) is reached on the evaluation and any prescribed regimen for the school.

It is a very intensive experience, serving on such a team, and it is a continual sense of wonder and admiration to me how responsibly and capably the evaluators work. Why does it work as well as it does (for it sometimes does come short)? Partly, I think, because strangers who are peers are cast together away from home base and its distractions, focused on the task of exercising their expertise, and pressed by the very limited time-frame to operate at peak efficiency. What is necessary for it to work well is a kind of connoisseurship in the team members, an ability derived from experience to perceive how an institution of higher education is well and does well as the kind of entity it is.

Evaluation theorists such as Scriven sometimes sneer at the "country club" character of educational evaluation as "in-groupy and very establishment," and not "a truth-seeking process" but an "initiation/confirmation ritual." There may be instances of what he decries, but his comments do not describe my experience. However, let me drop the first-person mode of address and lessen, at least, the danger of defensive reactions. There are real questions which can be raised about the effectiveness of the team visit.

First, even if there is testimony to the impartiality of some of the evaluators and their experiential ability, it remains open how far that ability extends. Are they in general, for example, capable of assessing the quality of the educational program and its level of achievement to the same degree that they assess the effectiveness of administrative structures and financial resources? Could they be relied on to assign a grade to that program? In its most general and comprehensive form, this question is analogous to that of Plato's *Republic*: what kind of education or preparation would we want the ideal evaluator to have, and how close can we come to that in practice?

Second, if the informed judgment of the team, granted that it relies partially on non-empirical elements, is assumed to possess a reasonable degree of objectivity (is not arbitrary or merely subjective), it ought to be replicable by another team. This check is rarely made.

Finally, if one of the objectives of the accrediting body is to assist in the **improvement** of the institution and of the **quality** of its achievement, is this objective integral to the structure of the team visit and report? The fairly recent practice of incorporating in the team report a section on consultative advisory comments is a step in this direction, but it is explicitly independent of the team's recommendation concerning accreditation.

Review Process. The fourth and final phase of the methodical evaluation of institutions is the process of reviewing the team report (readers and panels) and the final confirmation by the commission. Perhaps it is not too extravagant to suggest that the small percentage of radical reversals of the team judgment at this stage **tends** to confirm the general reliability of that judgment. But that fact may be subject to more cynical interpretations and certainly deserves independent support. One such more cynical interpretation would note the several recent national studies which have asserted the declining quality of higher education, and ask why this (alleged) decline is not reflected in the number of accredited institutions and programs.

The overall question in this section has been epistemological: how is it known that the standards are satisfied? a) Is the method presently followed for determining this organized in such a way that that is likely to be confidently known, and b) is it in fact achieving this purpose? (The second and third standards.) It has been argued earlier that the determination that the standards are satisfied necessarily involves a hermeneutical inquiry, interpreting the standards as they apply to a particular case, and interpreting the relevant data ("gestalting" them) so as to allow the complex ethos of the institution to come into view. Integral to this process are the methodical phases of the standards and the self-study, but axial is the role of the visiting team. Analysis of the way in which the visiting team is composed and functions has given some ground — with some reservations — for maintaining that it is likely to arrive at a reliable judgment.

Is the process in fact achieving its designed purpose? Here we face the same problem alluded to on the level of the evaluation of the institution: do we have any independent measure of the institution: do we have any independent measure of outcomes or basis for confidence? That is a question that needs to be addressed.

RETHINKING ACCREDITATION

Thinking back over the preceding analyses and questions, it is apparent that two issues kept recurring: the objective of assisting in the improvement of the quality of the educational institution and the lack of any measure of outcomes independent of the process of evaluation itself. These two issues would seem to be related.

The accreditation decision is currently the only external sanction which induces, periodically, an institution to examine its enterprise systematically and as a whole. But the standards involved are minimal, or at least have been so interpreted and applied. That would not necessarily be a criticism of accreditation if its only objective were to certify that a school has appropriate purposes and is organized in such a way as to achieve those purposes.

However, two things seem to be missing from this conception. One is the absence of an adequate, independent determination of whether the purposes are in fact being achieved, and the other is the anomalous absence of an evaluation of the quality of the educational enterprise beyond the minimum standards. "Anomalous" because a declared objective is assisting in the improvement of that quality. What is to provide the stimulus for the institution to commit itself seriously to broadening and deepening the excellence of its curriculum and the intellectual development of its students?

These two things could be related to each other if there were included in the requirements for accreditation an acceptable measure of outcomes, for that measure could serve as a grading (not ranking) standard for classifying institutions and so motivating them more concretely to improve. Is an acceptable measure conceivable? And would it be feasible to employ it as

a grading standard?

As every college administrator knows, there has been a great deal of discussion by state legislatures in recent years about outcome assessment. ACT has recently created a College Outcome Measures Program (COMP), and ETS established an Undergraduate Assessment Program some years ago (which it has since abandoned). None have yet been widely adopted, but at least they suggest that such a measure is conceivable. Are they acceptable? Only for certain types of postsecondary schools, no doubt, but in any case there would have to be different instruments for different kinds of schools.

Would it be feasible to require their being given? Probably that depends on whether the results were intended to be made public. It seems possible that, if they were required, the results could (for the institution as a whole) remain confidential just as self-studies and team reports are private. And that could provide an independent basis for assessing whether or to what degree the institution is actually achieving its purposes and also for grading (classifying) the institution.

There are of course many difficulties with this suggestion. To what extent are the goals of an enterprise of higher education measurable by such instruments? (Does that question imply that there is no measure possible?) Would the grading serve as a stimulus to improvement if it were not made public? Would standard instruments tend to inhibit innovation and induce greater uniformity? (Would that be bad?) Would member institutions consent to such a requirement? And so forth: any educator could rehearse the possible objections.

In the absence of such measures, it is hard to see how the quality of the educational programs can be evaluated in the context of institutional assessment. Are the members of visiting teams competent to provide such assessment even of the general education programs — reliably, objectively, uniformly? Perhaps they could, if standards of breadth and depth for such programs could be articulated. But it would require more than checking course titles, which all too often cloak remedial work at a secondary school level.

As for the goal of "assisting in the improvement of institutions" being accredited, perhaps it would be feasible to require as a part of the self-study that an institution list a series of steps toward improvement to which it committed itself, and which could serve as internal criteria of assessment at subsequent visitations. No doubt problems of interpretation and measurement would arise here also, but at least the goal of improvement would be given a concrete form and place in the accreditation process.

Notwithstanding the problems associated with these suggestions, to which no easy solution is apparent, it seems to me part of the responsibility of accrediting bodies to place the issue of the improvement of quality in postsecondary education higher on their agendas than it has been. Future students and the society as a whole have a right to expect that from us.

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